

There are likely a million other places anyone would want to spend their days besides the top of Hill 426. The hilltop, so non-descript as to not even warrant a name, is cold, muddy, windy and lonely.

Two Americans, a specialist and a private first class spend their days and their nights here, lonely days and cold nights. With a small contingent of Iraqi guards, the Soldiers pass their time as best they can. It's an odd situation where you have to get along with the person that's there with you. The language barrier being what it is, conversation with the guards, beyond a few broken words of Arabic and English and the ever-present hand gestures, can quickly become a form of entertainment.

There are safe houses that, while sparse in their amenities, are a world apart, comfort wise, from this place. Those on Bayonet base (Kirkuk Army Airfield) live in total luxury when compared to the total lack of anything here.

It's cold and it's lonely. It can be dangerous, the site was attacked several weeks ago and the road leading to it was land mined before that.

It's also wet and windy, with only a small tent to for shelter the small portable heater does little against the numbing wind that flows down from nearby mountains. It's silty soil should be dusty given Iraq's normal dry climate. But now, with the November rains drifting through, it's a base of thick mud. The kind that clings to your shoes growing them heavy and more soaked with each step. The kind of mud that clings to everything and resists any attempt at being shaken loose.

It's no small wonder anyone would live and work, let alone spend Thanksgiving, here. Yet, Spc. Christian Muller, who has spent and incredible 43 days here, and Rommie Longs, a five-day veteran of the hilltop, are doing just that.

While many of the paratroopers of the 173d Airborne Brigade complain about the 't-rations' served daily in mobile kitchen trailers these two young men still eat Meals Ready to Eat every day. No 'hot chow' is driven to their location as it is for many that are living in and around the city of Kirkuk. Once a week or so a supply convoy shows up to drop off more water, MREs and fuel.

But it was here, on this cold, lonely, windy, muddy and boring hill top that 15 fellow paratroopers spent their Thanksgiving, making sure Muller and Longs knew they weren't alone.

Maj. Johannes Paraan, Brigade S6 is the soldiers supervisor. As such he felt it was important to be with them during the holiday.

"This is a team effort and these are my guys," said Paraan. "We, back at the airbase, get to enjoy all the amenities and these guys they don't get to share in those things. I take care of them, just like they take care of me. Almost all of my soldiers came out here today, we only have minimal manning back in the tactical operations center."

Paraan is a tall man with dark skin. A good-natured guy with an infectious sense of humor. During the drive up, he cracks jokes every few moments and this troops crack them right back. It's clear he likes his men and that his men like him. It's hard not to laugh along with him actually, land mines or no land mines.

"We had a pretty good spread," he said. "Turkey of course, roast beef, ham, stuffing with mash potatoes and gravy, corn on the cob, green beans and shrimp. For desert we had chocolate muffins, pumpkin pie and of course 'sparkling wine'. He laughs holding up a bottle of carbonized grape juice.

"Yeah it was a pretty good spread," he said.

As the convoy rolled into camp the camp's permanent occupants and the passengers scramble to unload tables, chairs, plates, drinks, flatware and of course the food. In under 10 minutes the tables are set and the food is served. The non-commissioned officers and officers serve. Within minutes everyone is seated and enjoying a hot, nice meal. It is quite a spread, against the desolate surroundings it truly is a feast.

First Sgt. Brent Hagel-Pitt, is among those soldiers. He leads 251 soldiers in Iraq as the brigades headquarters and headquarters company first sergeant. Certainly he could have spent his Thanksgiving in any number of places. Warm, nicely decorated dining facilities among them. But he, along with the others, chose a different path.

Hagel-Pitt is an imposing guy. Stern and at times without humor he's what you would expect of a first sergeant in a 1950s movie about World War II. Think of the drill sergeant in Full Metal Jacket and you're close. He's got a dead serious job and he takes it that way.

"It's pretty miserable up here, specially now with the rainy season," he said as the sounds of his troops enjoying their meal can be heard in the background. "But they get by."

“As the first sergeant of a company I have daily responsibilities that always involve taking care of the soldiers. On any important day, a holiday or a birthday, it’s important to remind a soldier that even though he or she may be far from their paternal family their military family is always there to support them,” he said.

“It’s a holiday,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “It’s Thanksgiving and it’s an important holiday to anyone that grew up in the United States. If you can’t be with your family during this holiday then whoever you’re with should be your family.”

While no one in their right mind would want to spend their thanksgiving on this windy, cold and muddy hill, the paratroopers here chose to do so.

“I’d rather be home with my family sure,” Hagel-Pitt said. “Everyone here would rather be home with their families right now. But if I can’t be there, there’s no where else I’d rather be then here with these people.”